Spectatorship Socio-Affective Dynamics among US College Basketball Fans

Gabriela Baranowski Pinto, University of Connecticut
Vitor Leandro Profeta, University of Connecticut
Peter Mano, University of Connecticut
Dimitris Xygalatas (Advisor), University of Connecticut

Thursday, June 7, 2018
1:20 PM
Room: Sable A

Among sports spectators, the experience of watching a favorite sports team play can elicit intense and varied emotions ranging from frustration to amusement. Although, previous research has explored some of the factors that might be at the root of what contributes to attendance of fans at sports games (Laurent and Kapferer, 1985, Kuypers, 1997, Fisher & Wakefield, 1998, Forrest & Simmons, 2002, Rowe, 2009, Limmer, 2008, Phua, 2010, Sartore-Baldwin, 2012), no clear exploration is seen with respect to the relationship between psychological and physiological measurements that can help to understand the experience of fans at these events.

Previous studies with spectators of men’s and women’s sports events suggested that there are differences in motivational aspects and in the fanship levels presented by attendants of men’s and women’s sports. Kim, Ko and Park (2013) showed that regardless of the spectator’s gender, fans of men’s basketball events would consider game performance and staff quality in order to evaluate their intentions to revisit the venue for another game, while for women’s basketball events, fans would think about game performance and in-game entertainment in order to define if they will attend a future match. Despite the differences in the aspects that drive fans to attend sports, it does not justify the great differences in the attendance levels among male and female sports events. In fact, it was not proven yet that women’s sports quality of entertainment is actually different. If that was the case, the differences would be reflected in the socio-affective experiences and participation of fans during the games.

The present study was conducted considering that the U.S. College sports are a profitable business with a massive appeal and robust fanship in U.S. In an effort to apprehend the reactions of the affiliated spectators during different team gender sports games, the dynamics of emotional and behavioral experiences among basketball fans of the University of Connecticut were explored.

In order to accomplish this goal, the emotional reactions shown by the fans attending a live game were investigated, as well as how these emotions related to the game itself. Researchers looked at the psychophysiological factors that contributed to the experience of a good game. More specifically, differences between the reactions of men’s and women’s teams’ fans were investigated.

The dynamics of emotional experiences of 215 basketball fans were recorded through portable sensors which measured physiological changes through the heart activity. Participants also completed surveys and were submitted to pain threshold tests using a blood cuff, before and after the games.

The actions during each game were coded and analyzed as a source of arousal. We compared different games based on levels of competitiveness, team gender, game time structure, and individual characteristics accessed by the questionnaires. Sample entropy analysis, which gives a notion of repeatability of the heart activity, was used as an arousal measure through heart rate variability. Repeated measures of sample entropy were used in the growth curve modeling (GCM) performed in order to identify the possible predictors with a potential to trigger emotional reactions through heart activity.

Current findings indicate that the predictors that contributed to the GCM model were: periods of the game, differences in score, and age. During both game halves the participants presented lower sample entropy values than during halftime (E= -0.110, SE= 0.030), what confirmed that the spectator experience during the game was characterized by constrained heart activity and lower heart rate variability, due to increase in the stress and in the constraints of the environment. Also, it was found an interaction between the final difference in the game scores and
the progression of game time (E= 0.002, SE= 0.001), meaning that when the difference in score was high and the
time of the game was advanced, the sample entropy would grow. That is, as uncertainty levels decreased, so did the
attention to the game.

The pregame pain threshold test average was significantly higher than the postgame test (t(214)= -4.858, p< 0.001),
what might indicate that the levels of anxiety pregame are higher and matching the increased level of uncertainty of
the game.

Team gender did not seem to influence any of the measurements previously reported. It was not a predictor for the
GCM or a factor that would differentiate pain threshold values.

Implications
These findings provide insights on the emotional leisure experience of fans, which are relevant for understanding
leisure phenomena behavior. Better notion of the structure of the sport event and how fans interact with that is
important to create entertainment and marketing that is sensible to fans experience.
The lack of statistical difference between team genders might reinforce that it is not actually possible to identify
reasons why the core experience of fandom would be different due to the team gender of the game. That being true,
it should be explored in marketing in order to create awareness of society about the gender equality and to empower
female sports by increasing the audience in their games.